



**WATCH & LEARN: ARTS & LIFESTYLE**  
**LANGUAGE: COMMUNICATION STYLES**  
**HATE SMALL TALK?** (5:51 min/v28562)  
**VIDEO Script & Vocabulary** (page 1 of 2)

**ADVANCED LEVEL (C1) AND ABOVE**

- ◊ Read the script and note new vocabulary
- ◊ Write three sentences using new vocabulary
- ◊ Prepare for the discussion questions

**Starting Off**

*One of the reasons many of us find social encounters difficult is that they force us into small-talk - where we have to pay a lot of attention to the weather and the upcoming holidays. But what is small talk, why does it exist and how can we learn to navigate it more fruitfully?*

- 1 Read the **Video Script** below. The words in **bold** are defined in the **Vocabulary** section. Look up any new words in a dictionary.
- 2 Go to the **Your Turn** section at the end of this document. Practice using new words and expressions from the video script to prepare for your next class.
- 3 Look at the **Discussion Questions** and prepare your responses for the next class.

**Discussion Questions:**

- ◊ Do you sometimes feel anxious going to social gatherings where you might have to speak with people you don't know very well?
- ◊ Do you enjoy "small talk" or do you find it a bit banal and boring?
- ◊ Do you prefer speaking English with new acquaintances in social settings or work settings?

**Video Script:**

Alain de Botton, Swiss-born British Philosopher, Co-founder The School of Life: A lot of discomfort about going to social engagements is rooted in what can sound like a rather **high-minded** concern: a hatred of small talk.



We can develop a **dread** of parties because we know how likely we are to end up **wedged** into conversations about the weather, parking, traffic or the way we plan to spend the **forthcoming** holidays – when there would be so many deeper and more dignified topics to address: the future of humanity, the fate of the nation, or the melancholy state of our own hearts. We resent parties for holding up an ideal of community and dialogue while **trapping** us in unproductive and insincere **banter**; for making us more **lonely** than we ever would be in our own homes.

But we are perhaps misunderstanding what small talk is for, what it could be in our hands and how we might gently find an exit from its more **airless** corners.

Small talk exists for a noble reason: it is designed to prevent hurt. It provides us with a rich source of information so that we can safely **ascertain** the **frame of mind** of our interlocutor – and therefore gauge what more in-depth topics of conversation might safely be **broached**. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer once darkly reminded us that we should always remember, when meeting new people, that they might be only be a few steps away from wanting to grab the nearest weapon and end their own lives.

A few moments of small talk give us the signals we need to find out who we have on our hands; it lends us time to circle intimacy **from on high** before determining where we might wish to land. Furthermore, a rigid hatred of small talk **overlooks** that it isn't ever the subject matter **per se** that determines the profundity of a conversation. There are ways of talking about death that are trivial and ways of addressing the weather that feel significant. A truly deep mind can exercise itself as much on the game of a child as on the puzzles of philosophy – and it is unfortunate **snobbery** to discount a topic **merely** because it's never featured in **erudite**, academic curricula.

**Vocabulary:**

- **high-minded** - having strong moral principles
- **dread** - anticipate with great apprehension or fear
- **wedge** - force into a narrow space; stuck
- **forthcoming** - about to happen or appear
- **trapped** - forced into a situation in which we are unable to escape
- **banter** - the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks; superficial conversation
- **lonely** - sad because one has no friends or company
- **airless** - boring; inert
- **ascertain** - find (something) out
- **frame of mind** - a particular mood that influences one's attitude or behavior
- **broach** - raise (often a difficult subject) for discussion
- **from on high** - at a safe distance; from remote high authority or heaven
- **overlook** - fail to notice
- **per se** - by or in itself or themselves; intrinsically
- **snob** - a person who believes that their tastes in a particular area are superior to those of other people
- **merely** - just; only
- **erudite** - having or showing great knowledge or learning

*Vocabulary continued on next page...*



*Video Script continued on next page...*



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### Video Script continued...

**de Botton:** We should take inspiration from how many great artists have based their work around what were, **at heart**, versions of 'small talk'. In the early 1820s, the English artist John Constable painted fifty studies of the clouds above Hampstead Heath in London, finding extraordinary beauty and complexity in the ever-changing, quiet, aerial drama above him. (John Constable, *Cloud Study*) With no less **open-mindedness**, at the end of the nineteenth century, the French artist Paul Cézanne **paid** close **attention** to the varied beauty of apples, painting dozens of studies of these modest snacks laid out in bowls and on sideboards. (Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Seven Apples*) Buddhism teaches us that, to those gifted enough to see properly, the whole world can be found in a single grain of sand.

We should perceive no insult in a call to **glimpse** the grandest themes through the lens of small talk. The skilled conversationalist doesn't insist that atmospheric or traffic conditions or where a person has been at the seaside are **inherently** unworthy of discussion. They know that what a person feels about a cloudy afternoon might be a highway to their soul or that their experiences around parking might provide clues as to their attitudes to authority or their relations with their parents. They're not **put off** by having to work with **humble** matter; they are **deft** enough to use whatever is **to hand**.

The fear of small talk reflects a worry, hugely understandable and with roots in childhood experience, that we will be unable to influence the flow of a conversation by ourselves, that we will become the victims of the obsessions or **pettiness** of others – and that conversation is fundamentally a natural, **organic** occurrence which happens *to* us but cannot be created *by* us; it may at points be very engaging, at others hugely frustrating; but the outcome is not ours to determine. We can feel that when a person says something, we must **invariably** respond in a similar way: an anecdote about a golf tournament needs to be followed by another; if someone has a story about a booking confusion at a hotel, the other must **chip in** with a **corollary**.

But, in truth, we have far more conversational **agency** than this implies; it is almost always in our power to raise more intimate or profound **follow-up** questions. And we can do so with the confidence that few of us are ever committed to remaining on the surface; we just don't know how to descend to the depths. An individual who is currently talking at **puzzling** length about an airline meal has also inevitably been disappointed in love, had **bouts** of despair, tried to make sense of a difficult parent, felt confused about their direction – and will be **longing**, at some level, therefore to stop talking about cheese crackers and share the contents of their heart.

The confident conversationalist does not take fright at small talk and others' occasional, **apparently firm** attachment to it. They know that the small themes need only ever be the first, understandable and never-insulting steps, towards the sincerity and intimacy all of us **crave** at heart.

### Vocabulary continued...

- **at heart** - in one's real nature, in contrast to how one may appear
- **open-minded** - willing to consider new ideas; unprejudiced
- **pay attention** - take notice of someone or something
- **glimpse** - a momentary or partial view
- **inherently** - in a permanent, essential, or characteristic way
- **put off** - cause someone to feel dislike or distrust
- **humble** - (of a thing) of modest pretensions or dimensions
- **deft** - demonstrating skill and cleverness
- **to hand** - Immediately available or easily accessible
- **petty** - unduly concerned with trivial matters, especially in a small-minded or spiteful way
- **organic** - proceeding in a natural, unforced manner
- **invariably** - in every case or on every occasion; always
- **chip in** - join or interrupt a conversation by making a remark; contribute
- **corollary** - a proposition that follows from (and is often appended to) one already proved
- **agency** - ability to influence (something) by one's own actions
- **follow-up** - a continuation or repetition of something that has already been started or done
- **puzzling** - perplexing
- **bout** - an attack of illness or strong emotion
- **longing** - a yearning desire
- **apparently firm** - seemingly strongly felt and unlikely to change
- **crave** - feel a powerful desire for (something)

### Your Turn! Using new vocabulary is the best way to learn and remember it.

- 1 Choose three words or expressions from the video that are new to you and write a sentence using each one in your notebook.
- 2 Try to use them in a context that is familiar to you to help you retain them.
- 3 Please ask for feedback on your sentences in the next lesson.